

Biases within or Opportunities without? US and Chinese 14- and 18-month-olds' learning of novel words for Agents, Actions, and Objects

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Research shows that English learners typically have early vocabularies dominated by nouns. Interestingly, data from naturalistic observations and vocabulary checklists have converged to show that Mandarin learners acquire relatively more verbs at an earlier time in development. This study examined the ability of English- and Mandarin-speaking 14- and 18-month-olds to learn new labels for Agents, Actions, and Objects, by habituating infants to two dynamic scenes, each accompanied by a bare novel word. Preliminary results indicated that at 14 months, English learners demonstrated emerging competence to learn words for Objects but not for Actions, whereas Mandarin learners showed emerging competence to learn words for Actions but not for Objects. Surprisingly, 14- and 18-month-old Mandarin learners failed to learn novel labels for Agents, whereas English learners succeeded in doing so at 14 months. Results are discussed in light of how culture moderates the timing and potency of different word-learning factors across development.